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Decisive Moments, Uncertain Times/Decisive Moments, Somewhere Else

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TORONTO



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Jannicke Later: Woman Running (2006), HD video: Images courtesy Gallery TPW and Trinity Square Video, Toronto, and the artists.

By April Steele

What is the 'decisive moment' in contemporary visual art? Curators Kim Simon and Jean-Paul Kelly, of Gallery TPW and Trinity Square Video respectively, sought to answer this question with a curatorial discourse between concurrent exhibitions.

Simon frames her interpretation of the decisive moment as an instance within an unresolvable narrative, when the viewer attempts to extrapolate the storyline to allay the anxiety provoked by the unknown outcome. She sought to expand upon the decisive moment by presenting troubling narratives, though the disturbing element within each work is not necessarily immediately evident. "The challenge in these specific works resides in their imbrication of a contextual disassociation (where the specificity of the narrative lay outside the frame of what is visible) with the fact that these images have an affective impact that highlights the possibilities for sustained engagement," reads Simon's curatorial statement. By presenting the idea of the decisive moment in the context of violence or disturbance, she also explores the effects of troubling imagery on viewers.

Invisibility is at the crux of Ken Gonzales-Day's *Erased Lynching Series: Erased Postcards*, where the artist appropriates and alters souvenir lynching postcards and archival images from the 1850s to the 1930s in an effort to expose the extent of racism against Latinos in the American West. By removing the victim and rope from the image, Gonzales-Day focuses our attention on the apparatus of the spectacle itself: the crowd, the tree or gallows, photographers, jeering onlookers, and the postcard itself as a memory aid. The empty space left by the absent victim, wholly invisible in most images though remaining as a shadowy palimpsest in several, reinforces the forgotten history of racially-motivated lynchings and vigilantism, particularly against Latinos in California. The works are thoughtful and insightful; a deep consideration of history contextualized in a conceptual practice.

Decisive Moments, Uncertain Times
Gallery TPW

October 20 – November 19, 2011

and

Decisive Moments, Somewhere Else
Trinity Square Video

**At Trinity Square Video: October 27 –
December 9, 2011**



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**Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin: from the series
People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground
(2011)**

People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin is a response to archived images documenting 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland. Founded in 1983 in an effort to control the usage of images in the media, the Belfast Exposed archive consists of over 14,000 photographs taken by professional and amateur photographers. When an image was selected, a coloured dot was placed on the contact sheet; the circular photographs in Broomberg and Chanarin's series are the portions of the photographs obscured by the dots. These obscured photographic microcosms reveal select details of a moment in time – some insignificant, some telling – and include the layered surface marks left by a succession of archivists marking the images with their own unique codes. Here again, the context of the images is undisclosed and the decisive moment is unclear; the viewer senses the discord captured haltingly in the few recognizable images but, unable to fully construct the narrative, is left with the urge to understand the full story.

Paolo Canevari's brilliant video *Bouncing Skull* is a single frame shot of a war-torn residential area with a young boy kicking around a human skull as a soccer ball against the backdrop of a bombed-out apartment building. In keeping with Simon's idea of the invisible narrative, there are only a few moments in the 10-minute video where the skull is clearly recognizable; the viewer only slowly realizes what the boy is playing with. The long duration of the act and the boy's nonchalance transform the skull from an object of death and violence to a mundane plaything, presenting simultaneous scenarios of turbulence and peace. The work, uncomplicated in its construction, is both visually arresting and emotionally provocative. According to Canevari's notes, the video was shot in the former Serbian Headquarters in Belgrade, which was bombed by NATO in 1999.

The video *Running Woman* by Jannicke Later is particularly arresting. In it, a woman is shown running down a dark road, exhausted, sweating and gasping for air, her face bloodied and makeup smeared. She runs toward the camera on an endless loop, never reaching safety or revealing her pursuer. The viewer is implicated by their inability to act; uncomfortable with the position their gaze has placed them in yet consciously aware of the dramatic construction of the scenario. Here again, the sense of danger or violence is never presented outright; information is withheld so that we concern ourselves only with our own reaction to the suffering of others. The work is extremely visceral; dramatic, yet intensely real, and the viewer becomes aware of the power dynamics at play between viewer and subject.

John Moore's photograph *Benazir Bhutto Killed in Suicide Attack* shows a bomb exploding next to former Pakistan Prime Minister Bhutto's vehicle during an attack after an election rally. The image, a blur of motion, captures a crowd of onlookers with clouds of smoke and burning fragments aloft in the background. The violence of the moment is captured not by the subjects of the image, but in the depicted movement of the camera – clearly, Moore was in close proximity to the explosion and its force is made visible indirectly. Here, distress is visible but abstracted, softened perhaps by the viewer's inability to focus on the image and pinpoint the source of violence.



The companion exhibition at Trinity Square Video was less concerned with the decisive moment as part of a difficult or disturbing narrative, but presents it as something that can be captured in pure form through unedited time-based media, [Lorna Bauer: Kaleidoscope \(2009\): Colour video, 8:24 minutes.](http://sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/TPW3Bauer.popup.jpg) an event that happens on-screen. Many of the works still contain elements of the suggested violence present at TPW. Kelly described his interest in the indexical qualities of photography and the haunting effect of an image after it circulates. Also important is the implication of the artists' physical presence, involving them more directly in the viewer/artwork exchange.

Kelly's curatorial concerns are perhaps best embodied in Lorna Bauer's video, *Kaleidoscope*. The artist walks across a field of sparkling snow, armed with a rifle. She takes aim at the camera and fires a shot, which shatters the field of view: a mirror. The camera has been placed so that it is invisible to the viewer; we see only the mirrored image of the artist. She continues to shoot, shattering the mirror into dazzling fragments that become graphic elements in the stark imagery. The only sound is the wind, punctuated by the rifle shots and the clinking of breaking glass. Here, the gaze is crucial: the artist is essentially stalking the viewer but, at the same time, she is destroying herself; her figure is eventually obscured, out of view on the angled fragments of mirror. The work is visually brilliant and conceptually complex, threatening but playful and immensely beautiful.

In his curatorial statement, Kelly says: "The exhibition features work in which the artist's presence is reflected in, or in reaction to, their surrounding social landscape – often haunted by past or immediate threat." Roberto Bellini's video *Landscape Theory* is exactly this. An unscripted discussion between the artist and an onlooker was captured while Bellini filmed unrelated footage. The video imagery, which includes shots of sunsets, parking lots, contrails, and birds, acts as a visual foil to the overheard but unseen conversation. The stranger, presumably a local, asks Bellini what he is doing and suggests that he may get in trouble for filming the empty fields and parking lots, which are adjacent to a computer company and a

major overpass. The man repeatedly states that 'people are on edge about taking pictures' and that the 'PD will haul him in'. Bellini, who explains that he only intended to record flocks of swallows that gathered in the area, seems to humour the other man's sense of urgency; the conversation is obviously between two men with opposed viewpoints. The conversation skirts coded issues such as authority, the power of the gaze, social dynamics, and post-9/11 issues of security, the suggestions of which stand in stark contrast to the bucolic scenes of sunsets and the sounds of the flocking birds.

Jennifer Chan's video *capture* follows in the same vein as Bauer's work. A black computer monitor screen that is slowly broken, picked at, and peeled away by the artist, fills the frame. The artist is visible holding a camera-phone in the monitor's reflection. Similar to Bauer in both concept and appearance, she reveals the framework of the image itself and destroys her own reflection. Her use of low-tech camera-phone and computer monitor suggests a preoccupation with the digital age and media; perhaps this is her effort to reduce its paraphernalia to a mere physical, material object. The work is appealing visually, but lacks the conceptual cleverness of Bauer's approach.



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Lisa Oppenheim: *The Sun is Always Setting Somewhere Else* (2006):

35mm slide projection.

Lisa Oppenheim's *The Sun is Always Setting Somewhere Else* features a projection of images of the artist holding photographs of sunsets in front of actual sunsets in New York; the photographs she holds are taken from service members' blogs. The double imagery creates a strong push/pull between places near and far. Here too

see we images that are 'haunted' by our knowledge that they are scenes of war, however pretty. This solemnity is tempered by the kitschy humour of the images – they are postcard-like, Disney sunsets, and there is a playfulness in the manner in which they are held up to obscure the real thing.

In *Night Vision*, Stephen Andrews also utilizes imagery taken from a service member's blog, this time captured with night-vision equipment. Andrews utilizes crayons and window screening to imitate a screen-printed effect on mylar, resulting in glowing, pixellated, ambiguous images. There is a kind of anxiety in this ambiguity: it is impossible to see what is going on or what is about to happen. The viewer is unable to locate themselves in the field; their gaze is unfocused and decontextualized.

The work of Chris Hondros, the American Pulitzer Prize-nominated photojournalist killed on assignment in Libya in April 2011, is particularly poignant in this exhibition. His image *Besieged Libyan Cities Cope With War*, taken only two days before he was killed by a rocket-propelled grenade, shows a shard of mirror taped to a cinder block positioned by rebel insurgents to see around a corner on Tripoli Street in downtown Misrata, Libya. Around the makeshift object lie scenes of wartime devastation: bombed buildings, scattered debris and vacant streets. Reflected in the mirror is a yellow truck; behind that, an abandoned apartment building with shot-out windows. Though no danger is visible, the sense of crisis is palpable. What fascinates is his focus on the material object in sites of conflict. This simple apparatus, a broken shard of mirror held up with masking tape, held such import in matters of life and death.

Together, these exhibitions were an engaging example of an insightful curatorial discourse through concurrent exhibitions. The concept of the decisive moment and its perception is an appealing topic for consideration in the context of contemporary art. These exhibitions enhance the question of the decisive moment through the use of a disturbing narrative, thereby extending the discourse to include questions of its effects on the viewer, invisibility and visibility, the dissemination of imagery, its effects on the meaning of an image, and social dynamics.

April Steele is an emerging independent curator and writer currently based in London, England. She holds an MA in Art History from the University of Toronto. Recently curated exhibitions include *Liminal Place* at Artspace, Peterborough; and *Maidens, Spindles, and Mothers-of-all* at Forest City Gallery, London.



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